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INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
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RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHDC
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SUBJECT: BARBADOS' LABOR AND POLITICS: A HISTORICAL
OVERVIEW

¶1. SUMMARY: The stable democratic history of Barbados has been characterized by occasional periods of upheaval predicated by a lack of political, social and economic parity. The Social Partnership, first established in 1993, was created to thwart the then-downward spiraling economy and provide a mechanism for government, private sector employers, and labor to collaborate on critical issues of national interest. Now under its Fifth Protocol, the Partnership has proven to be a relatively successful tool of economic management and inclusive governance. End Summary.

Barbados Labor Politics: A Brief History

¶2. While Barbados has enjoyed a long democratic history, white-minority plantation owners and merchants of British descent dominated local politics until the 1930s. The first election under universal suffrage was held in 1951, after much political wrangling between the established ruling class and the descendants of emancipated slaves fighting for representation and socio-economic parity. Since then local politics have been dominated by the black majority.

¶3. In the early 20th century, Barbados was beleaguered by a depression in the sugar industry, which improved only briefly during World War I. Labor tensions were relieved by the exodus of large numbers of poor and unemployed Barbadians to work on the construction of the Panama Canal. However, the remittances they sent home led to the creation of a burgeoning black middle class that demanded more political and social rights. The consolidation of the sugar industry to meet mounting economic pressures, as well as the influx and influence of pan-African nationalists and socialists, eventually brought tensions between the traditional labor class and the planter-merchant oligarchy to a head in 1937 with four days of riotous rebellion.

¶4. Sir Grantley Adams, a lawyer and liberal pragmatist, helped found the Barbados Labour Party (BLP) in 1938, intending to mobilize and direct the surge of workers' political activism following the riots. (Note: the BLP was also known as the Barbados Progressive League from 1939-1944. End note.) The promotion of the organization as one dedicated to solidarity, political agitation, and social welfare helped it to garner a mass following within the first year. Over time, Adams, leadership led to several reforms including legalized trade union activities and universal suffrage.

15. Until the early 1950,s, Adams was the leader of the BLP and by extension the Barbados Workers Union. However, his political style of extracting concessions without irritating or directly confronting the ruling class frustrated the more radical anti-colonial elements of his party. His growing conservatism and intolerance for different views within the ranks of his party as well as the union, eventually caused a rift within the BLP. The younger, more progressive members of the party, including Errol Barrow, left the BLP and founded the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) in 1955.

16. Since then the BLP and DLP have volleyed government control and membership quite civilly. Over time, various other parties, spanning the spectrum from conservative to communist, have entered and exited the scene with varying levels of influence and success. None have been able to maintain the popularity or longevity of the BLP or the DLP. (Note: The socialist-leaning People's Empowerment Party, founded in 2006, has yet to gain any following of significance. End note.) In this environment, both parties constantly struggle to increase their power bases while maintaining their connection to their "labor" roots and simultaneously courting the economic influence of corporate Barbados.

What is the Social Partnership?

17. When near-crisis levels of unemployment and inflation in the early 1990s threatened the socio-political stability of Barbados, the Social Partnership was conceived. The Social Partnership, now a cornerstone of participatory democracy in Barbados, was established in 1993, under the

leadership of then-Prime Minister Sir Lloyd Erskine Sandiford of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). It is currently operating under its fifth Protocol, covering 2005-2007. The current protocol is a formal structure which outlines the collaborative relationship between government, labor and employers to foster sustainable social and economic progress.

It serves as a framework to recognize their inherent interdependence and provide guidelines for collaboration and consultation on all aspects of national development.

18. The original protocol was designed to help ease tensions created by the economic crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s, brought on by the recession of the early 1980s and excessive government borrowing for public works projects. The first protocol of the Social Partnership was essentially a wage freeze and became an important element in the country's recovery from the seemingly inexorable economic decline of the early 1990s. It set a path for sustained economic growth for the next 8 consecutive years, averaging 3 per cent per year. When the first protocol was implemented, unemployment stood at 24.3 per cent; it now stands at 8.5 per cent (December 2005).

Who are the Social Partners?

19. The social partnership includes:

GOVERNMENT: Since 1994, the Owen Arthur-led Barbados Labour Party (BLP), represented by three Ministers and representatives from the departments of Civil Service, Finance and Economic Affairs, Personnel and Labor.

PRIVATE SECTOR: The Barbados Employers Confederation (BEC) - which includes Construction and Allied Services, Distribution, Garages, Manufacturers, Hospitality Services, Financial Services, Ancillary Services, as well as Travel, Utility and Energy employers and Employers Associations - Barbados Agricultural Management Company, Barbados Hotel and Tourism Association, Barbados Sugar Industry Limited, and the Shipping Association of Barbados, as well as the Barbados Private Sector Association (BPSA) and the Barbados Business Authority (BBA)

LABOR UNIONS: Represented by the Congress of Trade Unions and Staff Associations of Barbados (CTUSAB), whose members include the Barbados Workers Union (BWU), Barbados Public Workers Union (BPWU), National Union of Public Workers (NUPW), Barbados Union of Teachers (BUT), Barbados Secondary Teachers, Union (BSTU) and others.

(Note: The media are not currently included in the Social Partnership. End note.)

Comment

¶10. Barbados has benefited from the unique though cumbersome mechanics of the Social Partnership, which has enabled the economy to grow continuously, albeit slowly, since 1993, discounting a brief recession in 2001. The Social Partnership brought stability to Barbados by keeping historic rivalries between labor, employers, and government in check. While globalization and regional integration may pose new challenges for the social partners, the Social Partnership framework is unlikely to change much in the near term, given the Barbadian society's broad consensus on its importance to the well-being of the country.

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